

Testimony

Environment Committee

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I am testifying in support of HB 5126 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A CHEMICAL INNOVATIONS INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT HEALTH CENTER.

Chemical policy is in rapid change both nationally and internationally, with significant implications for Connecticut businesses and workers. The European REACH legislation, for example, will restrict the import of products that contain restricted chemicals, and so Connecticut manufacturers need to be aware of the regulations and be able to access safer alternatives to chemicals in order to successfully export products. Similarly, it is likely that U.S. chemical policies, such as the Toxic Substances Control Act and acceptance of the Globally Harmonized System, will be undergoing major changes, and Connecticut employers need to be ahead of those changes in order to remain compliant and competitive. The approach of substituting safer alternatives to toxic substances has very significant benefits to workers and the community in relation to prevention of illness, to the environment in relation to reduced toxic burden, and to employers in relation to access to markets, reduced compliance costs, improved public relations, and reduced liability costs.

A recent Masters project by one of my student in Public Health has underscored the need for resources for Connecticut businesses to move to safer alternatives. We currently have very little information for actual chemical usage by businesses, so we modeled the Connecticut manufacturing sector based on reports in Massachusetts under their Toxic Use Reduction Act. We estimated that there are over 660 million pounds of chemicals used in CT each year, with over 300 million pounds each of carcinogens and reproductive hazards. This exploratory study clearly shows the need for a more detailed understanding of chemical usage in Connecticut, including products that are of high commercial value that may be affected by international and national chemical policy changes, and we anticipate that Bill 5126 will move us forward in gaining that knowledge.

We anticipate that a Chemical Innovations Institute at UConn Health Center will be helpful for the transition to safer alternatives through (1) providing expertise in relation to current and future chemical policy changes through integration with national and international networks, including the Interstate Chemical Clearinghouse, (2) providing training to Connecticut businesses and workers on chemical assessment and evaluation of safer alternatives, (3) providing a linkage to green chemistry efforts to develop safer alternatives, and (4) in helping businesses evaluate the effectiveness of the alternatives.

The Occupational and Environmental Health Center at UConn Health Center has considerable expertise in this area. We have done consulting and training for hundreds of Connecticut businesses, workers, and health and safety professionals on industrial hygiene, chemical evaluation, ergonomics, and healthy workplaces, so we have an in-depth understanding of the business environment.

We have multiple federal grants including a current study on the transition to green cleaning products in state agencies, the characteristics of effective health and safety committees in manufacturing, "Healthy Workplace" interventions combining occupational health with health promotion, the impact of the aging in relation to work exposures on the health of workers, the effects of vibration and ergonomic hazards, working with the "Tools for Schools" effort in relation to indoor air quality in schools and office buildings, tracking and under-reporting of occupational diseases, and many others.

We have had major conferences in the area, including a series of conferences and trainings on an innovative method of qualitative chemical assessment in companies known as "Control Banding" and a large conference on Green Chemistry and Safer Alternatives which was co-sponsored by business, labor, and environmental groups.

We have done extensive training of occupational health professionals including occupational medicine physicians, occupational health psychology doctoral students, industrial hygienists, safety engineers, and ergonomists. We have extensive, long-term, relationships with the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, which is at the center of innovation in relation to safer alternatives and international chemical policy research through the Toxics Use Reduction Institute and other programs.

We believe that Bill 5126 can be instrumental in moving these initiatives forward by raising visibility, establishment of a high-profile Advisory Board, and giving state recognition to these endeavors. These should be very helpful in attracting additional grants, foundation support, and business support to expanding the capability of the current activities, and allowing Connecticut to have a second major resource to complement the recently-established Yale Center for Green Chemistry and Green Engineering.

We recognize that the budget situation for Connecticut government is such that funding is not available to assist in this effort. We also respectfully request that any final language of the bill keep intact the language currently incorporated in the bill, specifically Sections 1 (h) and (i); that do not require UConn Health Center to undertake any duty of the institute if funding is insufficient to pay for the initial and ongoing expenses of the institute through the external funding sources that we will be soliciting. While we expect to be successful in attracting outside funding, UConn does not have the resources to perform the functions of the bill until such funding is in place.

In conclusion, we believe Connecticut is well-positioned to be a national leader in the promotion of safer alternatives to toxic substances, which will be beneficial to businesses, workers, the community, and the environment. UConn Health Center has considerable experience in both working with business and in the understanding of policy developments and training needs, and is well positioned to become a valuable resource in the effort. We expect that Bill 5126 will facilitate this expansion by establishing a formally recognized Institute which should help to attract external funding and resources, by establishing a Board structure that will facilitate communications with the important constituent groups and help to guide productive efforts, and by establishing a framework for national and international networking to benefit Connecticut.